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MEDINAH MEMORIES

This month, I'm looking forward to the 2013 Ryder Cup matches at historic Medinah Country Club No. 3 course. Medinah is personally historic, because it's where I first played golf.

My best friend's family were members, and I often went with them to swim, ice skate, or toboggan. When my friend took up golf, he wanted me to try it, too, which we did, starting in the summer of my 12th year.

At first, we just hit balls on the practice range, or putted on their huge putting clock near the front entry. My first divot was actually on that green, rather than any fairway, attempting to launch one clear to the other side with a huge putter swing. I sheepishly looked around to make sure no one saw me – a maintenance worker did – and learned the art of divot replacement and ball mark repair on the fly right then and there!

I was hooked on golf from the moment I stepped on the property, mostly because of the beauty of Medinah, with its mature trees, lush fairways and huge clubhouse made me feel as if this – and not Green Acres – was the place to be. (Note: That is one of those Facebook-type questions to see how old you are...)

Late one day, with the course empty, we actually attempted my first actual golf round on the ladies' course, where we could start with a three-hole loop of holes No. 1, 17 and 18. He lined me up on the first tee and stepped aside as I took my first shot – a shank that hit him in the right ankle. In pain, he set me up again, and again stood aside. My second shank caught his other ankle, ending our first attempt at "real golf" as I carried him on my shoulders back to the clubhouse.

Eventually, we played that three hole loop, then nine, and finally 18 hole rounds. We played the ladies' and then men's courses depending on traffic, but, having studied the layout of the famous No. 3 on club placemats and ashtrays, I was determined to someday play the famed No. 3.

We often played dawn to dusk in virtual seclusion, usually on Mondays, hoping to avoid guest fees. All went well for a few years, until one day, we arrived at the then 17th hole (now 13th) hole on No. 3, only to see the pro sitting in a cart behind the green. After nervously putting out, he presented us with a stern lecture and a bill for \$140 in guest fees for my three rounds that day. That was beyond the means of a 15 year old in 1975, and I tearfully took the bill home to mom and dad, who then paid for what I couldn't afford, and never mentioned it again. However, my days of free golf at Medinah ended.

Medinah forever cemented my interest in golf course design. I studied the club's placemats, with the routing and hole layouts, and continually developed hole designs on napkins (eventually, as I like to tell Pete Dye, evolving to a higher plane with drafting boards, and finally CAD). In fact, I still doodle golf holes at every chance I get, and hotel maids must wonder just what those note pad doodles may mean.

My interest in golf design caused me to call my local golf course architects (and later, first employers) looking for information and possibly a job. Around that time, articles concerning the upcoming 1974 U.S. Open there trickled out, with one crediting George

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Fazio (the 1949 third-place finisher at Medinah) with changes to the course. Knowing Killian and Nugent had done those changes, I was incensed, and tried to set the record straight, with little luck.

I watched the U.S. Open there, and disliked negative comments by Palmer and Nicklaus about the sharp doglegs on 13 (now 16) and 18, and on course conditions. That mature forest always makes ultra fast US Open greens difficult in the summer heat. The course dropped out of the top ten in national rankings, and has yet to recover.

As a teenager, I vowed to design courses just like Medinah. I never did, eventually agreeing with critics that the narrow fairways, deep woods, and deep bunkers left and right of most greens made for a tough, but not great course, and certainly not a fun one. I followed popular trends towards more numerous, but shallower bunkers for aesthetic, maintenance and pace of play reasons. Still, I like to believe that the "Spirit of Medinah" (the title of their excellent club history) shows in my work, because Medinah will always be first in my heart, if not my head.

I still follow every architectural change to No. 3, most recently by Rees Jones. As a golf course architect, I know the changes Rees made for the major tournaments are right, but in my heart, I wanted the course to remain as I remember it. Perhaps, I also hope for golf itself to remain as it was when I was 15. **GCI**